

Book Review: Two Women: Friendship, Politics, Writing

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TWO WOMEN: FRIENDSHIP, POLITICS, WRITING

Emma Scaramuzza

La santa e la spudorata. Alessandrina Ravizza e Sibilla Aleramo. Amicizia, politica, scrittura. [The Saint and the Hussy: Alessandrina Ravizza and Sibilla Aleramo. Friendship, Politics, Writing]
Naples: Liguori, 2004, 294 pp., ISBN 88-207-3690-X

I have followed the writing of this book on and off since, in 1988, Emma Scaramuzza, lecturer in contemporary history at the Università Statale di Milano, began teaching a course on 'Friendship, Politics and Feminine Writing (19th and 20th Centuries)', in the Masters in Women's Studies at Duoda, Barcelona. Reading it now has been a feast of information and perceptions of political friendship between women in Italy from the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th.

Emma's wisdom lies, I believe, in putting friendship and politics together in a historical account, as they are and were together in the lives of their protagonists. Separating friendship from politics, classifying one as of the private and the other of the public, has been a deadly operation for women's history, and, therefore, for history. This operation, which seems to follow a historical sign of phallic sexuality whether it is carried out by women or men, deprives friendship of its political quality, thus throwing away the opportunity that friendship offers of giving room to love in politics; since friendship, like friend, derives from the Latin *amare*. But in women's lives, friendship has been and is a lever with which to transform the world:

... if we study feminine subjectivities and lives in the places and contexts where they express themselves most strongly – the relationships with their fellow women, with men, with children, with the universe, with God – women's history tends to lose its fragmentary aspect. The alternating in the historical process of light and dark spaces, of the visible and the invisible, does not disappear but rather it shows itself to be the foundation of a flow of life-history that beats with an intermittent rhythm, like breathing, or like a thread of electrical light that switches itself off and then lights up. In the history of women, these threads are the relationships between women, uninterrupted threads, also when the connections are not evident. Sometimes, these threads interlink and give place to feminine and feminist movements. (pp. 282–3)

The book reconstructs and interprets an enormous amount of data on the relationship between Alessandrina Ravizza (1846–1915) and Sibilla Aleramo (1876–1960), pseudonym of Rina Faccio. The relationship began with a letter from Sibilla to Alessandrina dated 30 September 1898, and lasted, in life or in memory, and, above all, through writing, all of both of their lives. Alessandrina Ravizza was a very important philanthropist, untiringly active, who created and sustained countless initiatives to relieve the effects of poverty, illness, social injustice and prison among the most helpless proletariat of Milan. She did it from the relationship and recognition of feminine authority, without affiliating herself to organizations or parties. Sibilla Aleramo was a feminist novelist and journalist who, in 1906, published the autobiographical novel *Una donna* [A Woman], a novel translated in 1908 in France,

England, Germany and Norway, which caused huge scandal because in it she defended the freedom of a woman – her freedom – to follow her vocation in spite of being a mother. Her husband, when she left him, took away her son legally because of it. Sibilla Aleramo became a famous intellectual, who had relations with women such as Deledda, Maria Montessori, Eleonora Duse, Ersilia Majno and Linda Malnati, and who tried tirelessly to be happy with men. In her life and her writings there is a lot that anticipates the contradictions, hopes and sufferings of the sexual revolution of the last third of the 20th century, and, too, a strong sense of the happiness of being a woman that would coincide with the thinking of sexual difference. Her name is remembered, for example, at the cooperative that the Milan Women's Bookstore founded in 1975.

Of the extremely well-documented reading of the story by Emma Scaramuzza and of her interpretation of the historical characteristics that distinguish the generation of Alessandrina Ravizza from that of Sibilla Aleramo, I have remained with the sensation of the validity still today of the terrible and absurd choice between one's own vocation and being a mother, a choice that marked the life of Sibilla Aleramo. Today there is not the family law that took away by force her seven-year-old son, Walter, whom she would not see again until 1933 (31 years later), but for women who desire to be mothers the norms – legal or not – of the labour market have the same kind of effect as those that family law had then. Today there is talk, in politically correct spheres, of the reconciliation of family life and working life, an idea that is absurd and unrealizable, which can keep us eternally engaged with something that is useless, because women, like any living being, have only one life, and we want to continue to do so. That which does not fit in a human life, feminine or masculine, is not civilizing but rather alienating.

In the 'Conclusions', historical data are used to clarify the incredibly dense network of relationships between the protagonists and with the women and men of their intellectual circle and friends. Emma Scaramuzza addresses very well the question of forgetting in women's history. She concludes that

... the history of Sibilla Aleramo and of so many other young women at the beginning of the twentieth century who rejected the model of their mothers, leaving few and superficial testimonies of the experiences that came to fruit in the feminism between the nineteenth and twentieth century, seems to indicate that the consciousness of oneself and the world and the freedoms achieved, are with difficulty lost forever. They may be, for different reasons, kept for some time, like the garments of a precious bottom drawer to be used to their optimum when circumstances really require them. (p. 283)

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